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27 October 1967

MEMORANDUM

The South Vietnamese View of Negotiations:

Problems and Prospects

SUMMARY

This memorandum examines the attitudes of the South Vietnamese Government toward negotiations in both general and specific terms. The first section discusses the basic ingredients of the Vietnamese view and certain political factors which have recently come into play. In the second section we attempt to estimate GVN reactions to three sets of circumstances in which talks with Hanoi might be held.

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The attitude of South Vietnam's military government toward a negotiated settlement is dominated by three considerations: participation in any talks in which its future is at stake; rejection of NLF claims to authority over any portion of its territory or people; and guarantees against Communist subversion following a US withdrawal.

In addition to these fundamental requirements for a settlement, the degree of South Vietnamese cooperation in the event of preliminary talks between the US and Hanoi would depend on the status of the bombing campaign in the North, on the extent of reciprocal action by Hanoi, and on the secrecy in which the talks were held.

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I. General Attitude Toward a Negotiated Settlement

1. The attitude of South Vietnam's military government toward a negotiated settlement of the war has been dominated by three considerations: the Saigon government should be a full party to any talks in which its future is at stake; it should not be forced to acknowledge the authority of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSV) over any portion of its territory or people; and it should not be forced to accept a withdrawal of allied forces in circumstances which leave the Communists free to conduct terrorism and subversion in South Vietnam. These considerations relate both to the manner and the substance of negotiations, and, in Vietnamese eyes, involve both face and fate.

2. South Vietnamese authorities have not set forth any detailed proposals for a peace settlement; certain basic principles were enunciated, however, by Foreign Minister Tran Van Do in June 1965. The four points covered were: 1) an end to terror and subversive activity along with the withdrawal of all troops and cadres infiltrated from North Vietnam; 2) South Vietnamese control of its own internal affairs; 3) a gradual withdrawal of allied forces, reserving South Vietnam's right to call for further assistance if needed; and 4) international guarantees of any settlement.

3. South Vietnam's military leaders consistently have taken a stronger stand against a negotiated settlement than have most civilian leaders, but since early 1967 the military have shown increasing flexibility in approaching the question. In contrast with their earlier position that any negotiations would be premature, they have during the past year professed their readiness to talk with representatives of Hanoi anywhere and at any time. In addition, they have declared themselves willing to meet at any time with individual members of the NFLSV. This greater flexibility has resulted from continued US prodding, from election pressures which have forced the military leaders to take note of public aspirations, and from the increased confidence they have gained as the military and political climate has improved. It does not, however, appear to mark any fundamental change of attitude.

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4. Indeed, the new Thieu-Ky government, as a legally and popularly elected regime, may prove even more jealous of its prerogatives in the peace-making sphere and even more opposed to an accommodation of the NFLSV. Further improvement in the military situation may encourage Saigon to hold out for a more complete military victory. Such inclinations on the part of Thieu and Ky would be reinforced by their recognition that their real power for some time to come will derive from the army rather than from any mass organization and that they are not yet able to compete with a local Communist apparatus without US help.

5. Vice President - elect Ky currently is talking in terms of the Saigon government's being sufficiently strong in six months to initiate peace feelers, but there is no evidence that he is thinking in terms of a compromise settlement. President-elect Thieu's proposed "peace offer" is being made essentially to fulfill a politically motivated campaign promise and in full realization that it is almost certain to be rejected by Hanoi.

6. Saigon's leaders apparently are now willing to consider the possibility of admitting into their government certain non-Communist leaders of the NFLSV, but they have few illusions about any genuine cooperation with hard-core, Hanoi-oriented Viet Cong leaders.

7. Saigon has posed no serious obstacles to a unilateral US effort to establish contact with the DRV as a step toward talks, but it remains extremely sensitive to the possibility of substantive negotiations to which it is not a party. This attitude is reflected in the present spate of Vietnamese press charges, almost certainly government inspired, that the US intends to usurp South Vietnam's prerogative to make peace. The same point is implicit in the scenario of Thieu's "peace offer," which envisages the US stepping into the picture only after the DRV has responded to a GVN initiative. In a press interview of 19 October this year, Foreign Minister Do was more explicit; he asserted that the GVN would play the "main role in any peace talks," which in his view should be attended by all the nations that have contributed troops.

8. Another fact which should be noted is that South Vietnam's new constitution gives the National Assembly the power "to determine declarations of war and the holding of peace talks." Apart from the militant Catholics, the predominantly civilian assembly is not likely to be more recalcitrant toward negotiations than the executive. South Vietnam's leaders might try to exploit this constitutional provision, however, should they feel that negotiations might jeopardize their own interests.

9. In the final analysis, the degree of South Vietnamese cooperation in any approach to a settlement will be governed by the considerations mentioned earlier, i.e., by the extent to which Saigon believes its essential interests are protected. These requirements would of course become decisive in the event that US-DRV talks moved from preliminary to substantive questions. But they probably would strongly influence the GVN's willingness to cooperate even in the first stage of any talks.

10. South Vietnam's basic requirements for a settlement may be modified, of course, if the strategic balance alters significantly over the next year or so. In this event, GVN cooperation would depend on the extent to which its assessment of the prevailing situation accords with our own. Another factor which could assume more importance under changing conditions is the degree of confidence Saigon has in US motivation. This has not been a significant problem so far, largely because the military leadership has assumed that US policy is to pursue the war until it can be brought to a conclusion on favorable terms. Should the GVN interpret any future diplomatic moves on our part as signifying a retreat from this policy, its attitude toward negotiations would become increasingly intransigent.

II. GVN Reactions to Three Possible Contingencies

1. The degree of difficulty we could expect to encounter in our relations with the South Vietnamese Government would vary according to the circumstances and nature of discussions between the US and Hanoi. In the following section, three eventualities are considered. It is assumed that these discussions would represent merely the first stage of negotiations toward a settlement, i.e., that they would be "talks" concerned mostly with preliminaries rather than "negotiations" on major substantive issues of the war.

a. Direct US-DGV discussions in secret, but known to the highest levels of the GVN. Of the three sequences, this would involve the least degree of difficulty in Saigon, and the GVN would probably go along with an initiative of this type. One influencing factor, however, might be the extent to which the GVN is kept informed of the course of the discussions. If the talks were held without a pause in the bombing (as we assume in this case), the GVN might well suspect an element of weakness on the Communist side in view of the consistent Communist stand that an end to the bombing must precede any talks. The secrecy of the talks probably would appeal to the GVN, since it would minimize the political fallout in Saigon. This assumes that the GVN would not leak its knowledge of the talks as a means of sabotaging them. Should the GVN choose from the outset not to go along with this US course of action, it might base its position on any of the three principles noted in the preceding section. The GVN's major argument in trying to discredit the effort would hinge on the issue of Vietnamese sovereignty. This argument would have some appeal in South Vietnam, but it would be weakened by the fact that the talks were exploratory rather than definitive in nature. Arguing against the desirability of talks altogether would be difficult for the GVN since it is publicly pledged to enter into talks without preconditions. On balance, we doubt that the GVN would opt to oppose the US on this course of

action initially, in view of the tentative nature of the discussions, the aspect of secrecy, and the fact that there would be no letup in the bombing of the North.

b. DRV-US discussions following a cessation of the bombing, with the fact of talks assumed or known publicly, the details secret, and the GVN not included at first. This combination would involve more difficulties with the GVN for several reasons. Two of the major ingredients of the first sequence would be missing in this case--the continuation of the air war in the North and the secrecy of the talks. Talks held under these conditions would be viewed by the GVN in a very different light. If a bombing pause were not accompanied by a reciprocal military response on Hanoi's part, talks would most likely be viewed by GVN leaders as a concession to the other side. A reciprocal step by North Vietnam would mitigate this attitude somewhat, how much would depend on the extent of Communist restraint. In either case, the cessation of the bombing would lend US-DRV talks a degree of firmness not necessarily present in the first hypothetical sequence. In addition, the GVN would have to contend with the considerable political ferment generated by a bombing pause of any significant duration. Even if only for the sake of appearance, the GVN would probably feel compelled to seek a formal active role in talks under these circumstances. Moreover, the GVN probably would be more prone to demand a detailed accounting of the exchanges and would be likely to press for representation at the conference table as soon as possible.

c. DRV-US agreement to encourage talks between the GVN and the NLF, held either as a sequel to the US-DRV discussions or independently of them. This combination is the most complex and has the greatest potential for difficulty with the GVN. In the first place, this sequence seems to begin at a more advanced point than either of the earlier cases, since it assumes prior agreement between the US and the DRV. As such, this scenario could be

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an extension or result of the first two eventualities, with their differing sets of circumstances (i.e., with or without secrecy and a bombing pause). The prevailing circumstances accordingly would have great bearing on initial South Vietnamese cooperation. Unless the GVN had modified its past and present attitude toward a general settlement prior to the DRV-US agreement posited here, it would certainly object to holding talks with the NLF during a bombing pause and on the basis of a semipublic agreement between the US and Hanoi. Under these conditions, the GVN would view an approach to the NLF as a major factor influencing a final settlement of the war and thus jeopardizing its essential interests. It is less certain that the GVN would object to such talks if, as in the first case, the bombing were continued and US-DRV talks were kept secret. Much would depend upon the ground work laid with the GVN and its prevailing judgments on some of the general factors discussed previously. Should they be willing to talk to the NLF under these conditions, the GVN leaders probably would prefer to do so as a sequel to US-DRV discussions rather than independently of ongoing US-DRV discussions. In the event the GVN decided not to cooperate in this scenario, one course of action would be to reject the idea of talks with the NLF outright. This action might be accompanied by a publicity campaign. Another possibility would be to open talks for the purpose of sabotaging them. Again, which alternative the GVN chose would be influenced by the prevailing circumstances.

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